

Responsible for Everything, Owner of Nothing: Finding the Right Chief of Staff

By Lindsay Trout



The Chief of Staff role is perhaps the trickiest hire for a chief executive to make. While the role can often be considered a “catch-all,” we see that the remit is usually broken down into three broad categories:

Advance work: Paving the way for the CEO and the rest of the executive committee is perhaps the most visible part of the CoS’s job. This includes preparing presentation decks and briefing executives for meetings, acting as liaison between the executive committee and outside groups, and handling internal communications.

Strategic and special projects: These are often initiatives that cross functions or that need to come directly from the CEO’s office to increase the chance of adoption. The CoS often leads information-gathering projects so that the CEO and executive committee can evaluate options and make decisions. If the company does not yet have an executive dedicated to corporate development, that function often falls to the CoS as well.

Business operations: Many times, the CoS is often the person in the best position to drive implementation of the metrics systems and business processes that emanate from the C suite. And because the CoS represents the CEO rather than any specific function or unit, he or she is often called upon to deliver bad news: the cancelling of pet projects, budget cuts and terminations.

The ideal CoS is **impeccably organized**, “**always on**” and has a **near-telepathic rapport** with the CEO. But while these qualities are necessary, it is a mistake to think they are sufficient. The CoS must have the problem-solving, strategic **mindset of a consultant** (which is why many top chiefs of staff have done a consulting stint). That strategic thinking needs to be combined with an **ability to forge relationships** in service of the CEO’s agenda.

Identifying someone with these organizational, strategic and political competencies is difficult—but the real challenge is finding someone who can do all of the above and genuinely **not mind not getting credit** for any of it. The CoS has to be comfortable being responsible for everything and owning nothing.

Who would take such a role? Someone whose curiosity about the business and drive for understanding could only be met through the unique access and perspective that a chief of staff is granted. But that

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doesn't mean that they are altruists: Successful CoS candidates recognize that the learning and mentoring the role provides will pay off many times over during the course of their careers.

Finding the right chief of staff is a test of an organization's talent management acumen. But the return can be substantial, for the company, the CEO and the chief of staffer.

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